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ABSTRACT

Distance education has been used by Ontario universities since before the turn of the century to provide university programs to adults who are unable to attend traditional classes. Currently, 11 of Ontario's universities have distance education programs using broadcast or cablecast television, videotape, teleconferencing, audiocassettes, or print. Laurentian University, serving an area twice the size of France with a population of only 650,000 in scattered communities throughout Northeastern Ontario, is committed to the provision of university-level programs through distance education. The special needs of the people of Northeastern Ontario include bridging programs for francophones to bring them to university entrance, the provision of basic and graduate commerce programs to help increase the economic base of what are essentially single-industry towns, and the provision of continuing professional education for teachers, social workers, and nurses in isolated communities. Government cutbacks have caused a significant retrenchment in an off-campus program which once serviced over 40 communities. In spite of this, developments in the distance education program have continued, and a teleconferencing network has recently been added to existing courses by television, audiocassette, and print. The university is also involved in cooperative ventures with TVOntario. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of strategies for the future. (Author/MES)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION: A NORTHERN SOLUTION?

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A Presentation to the

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DISTANCE EDUCATION: A NORTHERN SOLUTION?

ABSTRACT

Distance Education has been used by Ontario universities since before the turn of the century to provide university programs to adults who are unable to attend traditional classes. Currently, 11 of Ontario's universities have distance education programs using broadcast or cablecast television, video-tape, teleconferencing, audio-cassettes or print. In 1983 the Council of Ontario Universities, recognizing the growing importance of distance education, created a standing committee to discuss the co-ordination of future developments. Among its accomplishments are a comprehensive listing of all distance education courses by discipline, the first of its kind in Canada.

Laurentian University, serving an area twice the size of France with a population of only 650,000 in scattered communities throughout Northeastern Ontario, is committed to the provision of university-level programs through distance education. The university has been a leader in the provision of continuing education programs to nurses and is in the final phases of a proposal to combine distance education methods and technology with satellite campuses to provide a Post RN BScN degree across the North.

The special needs of the people of Northeastern Ontario include bridging programs for francophones to bring them to university entrance, the provision of basic and graduate commerce programs to help increase the economic base of what are essentially single-industry towns, and the provision of continuing professional education for teachers, social workers, etc. in isolated communities, to name only a few. Laurentian is attempting to meet these needs and further its regional commitments in a climate of steadily declining government support. Cutbacks have caused a significant retrenchment in an off-campus program which once serviced over 40 communities. In spite of this, developments in the distance education program have continued, with the recent development of a teleconferencing network added to existing courses by television, audio-cassette and print. The university is also involved in co-operative ventures with TVOntario.

The paper concludes with a brief discussion of strategies for the future.

DISTANCE EDUCATION: A NORTHERN SOLUTION?

I Lifelong Learning: The New Reality

This is a time of substantial technological change, requiring a commitment to lifelong learning, both for the acquisition of new skills and to transform old experiences into new meanings. The information economy is replacing the industrial economy, with a resulting shift in the educational prerequisites for employment. This requires an intelligent choice of technologies that will serve not only economic and strategic goals but also long-range social and ecological objectives.

Knowledge is power, but now the field of knowledge is expanding by leaps and bounds so the life span of some professions is being measured in years instead of decades. Lifelong learning has become a necessity. Education is considered to be the answer for a rapidly changing world, while at the same time it is an area affected profoundly by societal changes. Universities are being subjected to growing social pressure to respond favourably to the demands of adult education.

Computer-assisted learning packages are being developed, courses are being taught by audio cassette, by television, by teleconference - the field of distance education has expanded as fast as new technologies have appeared, with the promise of ever greater potential through developments such as satellite transmission, video discs, video-teleconferencing and two-way interactive telidon.

Distance education has also expanded because of human pressure, as people's lifestyle have demanded more flexibility. While many students learn at a distance because they have no choice (home or job commitments or unavailability of programs), many choose to learn outside the traditional classroom environment because of unpleasant memories of childhood learning experiences or the challenge of self-directed learning.

"Distance education" can be a misleading term and in fact requires only the tangible separation of the learner and the tutor. Within that broad construct lies a variety of possibilities, including correspondence study, interactive television and teleconferencing. The actual distance may be as much psychological as physical. Administratively, distance education requires substantial and senior internal institutional support to be successful, mainly because it requires a marshalling of the institution's human and capital resources and because the bulk of its costs are up front.

The development of distance education in Canada generally and at Laurentian University specifically provides a valuable foundation for assessing current initiatives and options for the future.

II A Brief History of Distance Education in Canada and Ontario

Contrary to popular thought, distance education is not a rural phenomenon. It began in the industrial cities of nineteenth century England, Germany, Scandinavia and the United States. Only in Canada and Australia, where large areas of land are still sparsely populated, do many distance education strategies show learners and tutors working at great distances. In Canada by far the majority of registrations are still to be found in urban centres because strategies increase access and provide more flexible methods of learning than are provided in traditional classroom-bound contexts. Sixty per cent of the University of Waterloo's distance education students live in urban areas.

Before the turn of the century, Queen's University had begun its program of correspondence courses, which, in conjunction with its summer school, permitted adult students (mainly teachers) to earn a degree. This model was subsequently adopted by many other Canadian universities. The University of Toronto used correspondence preparation for some of its summer school courses. The need to provide for a uniform standard of education across provincial borders led to the development of print-based distance education courses by professional organizations.

University involvement in these programs was at first concentrated in Queens and the University of Toronto. Within many professional groups and particularly in the various organizations of accountants, print-based course training became a requirement even for university graduates preparing for professional examinations. Concurrently, similar programs were also being developed and used by provincial agencies for primary and secondary school students and for vocational training.

The late 1960's and early 1970's saw the birth of a large number of distance education facilities, including the Tele-Université du Québec, the Open Learning Institute of British Columbia (OLI) and Athabasca University as well as a variety of provincial communications authorities such as ACCESS/Alberta, TVOntario and the Knowledge Network of the West (KNOW).

More recently, in March 1984, the ministers of education of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon and the Federal Minister of Inter-Governmental Affairs signed a letter of agreement to create a Distance Education Committee to consider collabortive development and acquisition of distance education materials. In September 1984, the British Columbia government created the Open University Consortion including all provincial universities, KNOW and OLI. In Atlantic Canada, the Atlantic Provinces Commission on Higher Education created the new position of Director of the Office of Educational Communications. The Atlantic Provinces Association for Continuing University Education was granted $20,000 by the

Ministry of State for Science and Technology for a project entitled "Consortial Atlantic University Programming on the Personal and Social Impacts of Technological Change". In late 1985, the government of Manitoba gave one million dollars to the University of Manitoba to develop its distance education program.

In Ontario in 1982, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) commissioned a review of distance education delivery of university-level programs. Following the report, COU created in March of 1983 a standing committee on distance education to encourage cooperative developments in the field. In Ontario 12 of 16 universities are currently engaged in some form of distance education for undergraduate degree credit, graduate work, professional upgrading or designation and career development. Leaders in the field include Wilfrid Laurier, the only on-going producer of broadcast-quality material (4 courses on air), the University of Ottawa, with an extensive audio-teleconferencing program, the University of Waterloo, with over 20,000 yearly registrations in its audio-cassette correspondence program, and Laurentian University, with a multi-media based bilingual program offering degrees in three disciplines. Although it is difficult to establish directly comparable figures, estimates are that over 30,000 Ontarians are served through university level distance education programs. The 1982 Snowdon Report estimates that in the short run 25,000 - 30,000 additional Ontarians are likely to be attracted to new distance education programs.

Considering the constraints on the exisiting university system which show no signs of improving, this alternative form of education is well worth examining, not only for part-time but also for full-time study. A judicious combination of traditional and distance education formats holds a promise for lifelong learning.

III Distance Education at Laurentian University

Laurentian University was created in 1961 to serve the needs of Northeastern Ontario, a geographic area twice the size of France, with a current population of 650,000. The university is the major partner in a system of on-campus federated church-based colleges and affiliated university colleges in Sault Ste. Marie, 300 kilometres west of Sudbury, Hearst, over 600 kilometres north and, North Bay, 120 kilometres east. Undergraduate degrees are available in Arts and Science, Engineering, Social Work, Commerce, Education, Nursing and Human Movement. Graduate programs are offered in Arts, Science, and Business Administration. Many programs are offered in English and French.

Envision, Laurentian's Distance Education program, began in 1972 as an innovative attempt to bring university courses to a scattered population with no tradition of university participation.

Currently, Laurentian has over 60 courses available via print-based correspondence, audio-cassette, television, video-cassettes in learning centres in 25 communities and teleconferencing. Degrees are available in English in Psychology, Law and Justice, and Religious Studies. An additional degree in Sociology will be completed shortly. In French, a total of ten courses are offered in various subject areas, with a major expansion effort underway.

The university produces over 90% of the courses it utilizes. Two courses have been produced in collaboration with TVOntario and several other universities. Some are leased from other universities. It is Laurentian's policy not to duplicate course development wherever possible.

Recent changes in the development process will incorporate a course team model, including three content experts, an instructional designer, course editor and graphic designer. As part of the process, the Centre for Continuing Education, which administers the program, has produced a distance education course development manual to provide guidelines for all courses and is planning faculty workshops on course design. Overall academic responsibility for courses rests with the Senate Committee on Continuing Education.

Northeastern Ontario has special educational needs which can be addressed via distance education. The area incorporates many small, isolated communities which are single-industry towns, based on the primary resource industries of mining and forestry. Participation rates in university programs, although increased significantly with the presence of Laurentian, are still lower than provincial norms. As well, levels of high school completion are lower than in the South.

The population of Northeastern Ontario is comprised of 40% francophone. Here participation levels are even lower and the university, through the Centre for Continuing Education, is currently developing a series of non-credit bridging programs delivered via distance education. Similar programs are being developed in English and are being considered for the area's large native population.

Continuing professional education is essential for individuals in teaching, social work and nursing. Laurentian was a founding member of the Northeastern Ontario Telehealth Network, which links over 30 area hospitals by audio-teleconference. The university has added several additional sites and now has a dozen separate locations set up. Bridging is done through Darome equipment at NOTN. A pilot project has just concluded successfully and plans call for a minimum of three courses next year, including an introduction to social work, in French.

Since its inception, Laurentian has attempted to service various off-campus communities with traditional face to face instruction. Over the years, over 40 different communities including Moosonee, 600 kilometres north, on James Bay which can be reached only by rail or air, have hosted courses and on occasion complete programs. However, in the last few years Ontario has slipped to 9th place in provincial government support to universities. Being new and bilingual, Laurentian has experienced significant financial difficulties as it attempted to fulfill its regional commitments. During the last year, off-campus programs ran in 18 communities, with the majority of the courses offered in education (français). The implementation of teleconferencing will hopefully reverse this trend, as fewer students are required for financially viable programming. Normally the university requires approximately ten students for face to face instruction whereas distance education courses by teleconference require only five students. In other distance education courses, faculty are paid for each student who registers, so no courses are cancelled, no students are disadvantaged.

Laurentian also believes that some courses are best offered by television and has been a leader in educational telecourse production. When the university decided costs were too great to continue independent production, proposals were initiated to work co-operatively with TVOntario and sister institutions. One series has been completed and a second is now underway. These programs are then aired on the provincial network, increasing access.

Much interest has recently been generated by a feasibility study for the provision of Laurentian's unique Post-RN BScN degree using an innovative blend of distance education methods and technology with face to face instruction on satellite campuses. Central to the success of the program will be the development of a network of clinical experts throughout the North who are qualified to supervise the practical component of the degree. The Telehealth Network will be utilized fully.

Critical to the implementation of any sound distance education program is an understanding of the many aspects of course development and design.

IV Course Development and Design

Distance education, because of the separation of teacher and learner, requires a different approach to course design. As well, the experience and learning objectives of adult students have had some impact on the design process. In many cases this may require the re-organization of course material itself, as the emphasis switches to the learner.

Distance education course design is in itself a subtle professional development exercise for faculty members. The design process incorporates a collaborative model so, for possibly the first time, a faculty member may find him/herself working as part of a design team, with other members including both content and process experts. In this model, learning objectives must be specified and course development must adhere to these objectives. It has been the experience of learning designers that this process impinges favourably on classroom teaching. The final result of the course team, multi-skill process carrying out formative evaluations is a high quality product. Members of the team include a content specialist/writer, an instructional designer, and audio-visual producer, an editor and a graphic designer. Even more interesting, evidence suggests that the course work produced by the learner is as good as, if not better than that produced in classrooms.

The development of a distance education course generally follows a specified sequence. First, the course material is divided into obvious units. Learning objectives are then established for each unit. These objectives should be sequential, with each unit building upon those preceding it, integrated with the course material as a whole, relevant to the overall objectives of the course and achievable. Each unit should provide a number of opportunities for the student to test his or her progress in achieving the objectives, either through self-assessment or instructor/tutor evaluation. The learning process itself should be evaluated by the student and the tutor to ensure that it is suiting both the student's needs and the course requirements. Finally, at the conclusion of the course, all aspects of it should be evaluated in terms of intended learning outcomes.

Not long ago, studies of distance education activities stressed "the loneliness of the long distance learner". This is changing as course designers increasingly build into the course a series of meetings, either in person, by phone or by audio-teleconferencing. Studies have proven that this form of contact cuts attrition significantly and enhances the learning experience.

V Costs and Benefits of Distance Education Development

There are many misconceptions associated with the development of distance education programs. Universities assume either that costs are prohibitive or that they are so low that quality education cannot result. The truth is far more complex and involves difficult questions of institutional reward systems, and the societal responsibility of universities.

Faculty participation in continuing and distance education initiatives is difficult to ensure for two reasons: first, development fees are normally not in line with external consulting fees and second, this participation is at best, not considered, at worst, considered negatively, for tenure and promotion. An exception to the latter situation exists at the University of Guelph, where both the quality and quantity of continuing education participation are considered.

In addition to the cost of faculty resources other development costs include the personnel on the course team, the rental of supplementary material (including copyright clearance) travel and honoraria. Distance education is not "education on the cheap", neither is it as exorbitantly expensive as it may appear at first glance. Costs for distance education courses are front-end loaded, but because of careful planning of course materials, these costs may be amortized over an expected five-year lifespan of the course. It is virtually impossible to compare cost across programs and technologies.

Of far greater significance to the university than the cost of individual course development is the question of what the university loses in terms of its reputation for leadership, excellence and innovation, opportunities for research, and opportunities for staff development if it continues to restrict its teaching activities to the classroom. Such restriction is clearly no longer appropriate to adults locked into busy working lives and coping with the stresses of overwhelming social and economic changes.

VI Strategies for the Future

As more post secondary institutions become involved in distance education, increasing financial resources are brought to bear on development work. Unfortunately, this more often than not results in significant duplication of effort. In an attempt to halt this duplication the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education has for many years published a distance education directory, copies of which are available from AUCC (The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada). As well, the Council of Ontario Universities now publishes a similar booklet for Ontario only. These directories allow sister institutions to see at a glance what has been produced elsewhere and, hopefully, to consider utilization of exsiting courseware instead of duplication. It is at best a passive form of collaboration which in Ontario is now assuming a more active form through various initiatives of the Council of Ontario Universities Distance Education Committee.

Over the last four years, provincial and federal governments have shown increasing interest in distance education. Talk of "rationalizing" development has been prevalent, and several initiatives to this end have already occured. Co-operation and collaboration on course development will no doubt assume increasing importance. However, while it is remarkably easy for universities to discuss co-operation, it is remarkably difficult to make it happen. Guidelines for collaborative development of courses do not exist.

In the meantime, several private companies are expanding their activities to include distance delivery of an existing or new product. The Campion Language Institute has created high quality packages in several languages with course development work being done by university faculty across Canada. Northland Open University, operating under federal letters patent and not accredited by AUCC, has initiated an agressive marketing campaign, offering bachelors degrees in commerce and engineering, while its affiliate, the Canadian School of Management, offers MBA's. The universities of Canada may be assured that poor quality production and presentation of distance education material will not be accepted by an increasingly sophisticated market. Again, if we are unable to afford quality production singly, collabora- tive development simply makes good sense, in a competitive marketplace.

The obligation to do quality work extends to the area of substance, not simply form. A glossy kit of materials which are not well put together brings no credit to us. Every university which makes a commitment to distance delivery should also, must also, make a commitment to instructional design and the provision of services to those students who learn at a distance. No university should ever move into distance education simply because it is seen as a potential source of easy revenue - our traditions of excellence must extend to this highly visible form of education.

In order to enhance the stature of distance education within universities, we must integrate the course development process into our criteria for tenure and promotion. We must encourage and promote research in the field of andragogy, with special emphasis on distance delivery. Only by succeeding here can we raise the academic profile of course design. By extension, the quality of teaching on our campuses will also increase.

As we gain more experience working with various technologies, we will be able to make more considered judgements on the benefits of each to the learner. Some material lends itself to graphic representation, some to television production, while some require the exchange of ideas possibly by teleconference or the face to face contact of the classroom. Possibly, judicious blending of technologies may be the answer, with courses including a print base, audio and video cassettes, teleconferenced seminars and face to face interviews between students and instructors.

Finally, as universities become increasingly aware of the need to open access to their programs in times of financial restraint, there can be little doubt that distance education truly democratizes access in a systematic, planned manner.